Sunday August 11, 1974

"A RELIGION OF THE TABLE" Matthew 26:20-30

Have you ever thought how you would spend the evening if you knew you were going to die tomorrow? What activity would you engage in and who would you want to be present with you?

Most of us, of course do not know which night will be our last night alive, so in a sense the question is only a theoretical one for us.

Jesus Christ, however apparently was quite clear that the end was drawing near for him and that a certain day could well be his last. So he chose to invite his very closest friends to be with him and to have a meal together. They sat around a table and shared bread and wine. They talked, they argued, and from that experience Jesus apparently derived strength. Later of course, his disciples remembered in particular that last evening together and they gathered again and again to remember and re-enact that event.

The table has since the beginning been at the center of our Christian Faith. In every church, large or small, you will usually find some kind of table or altar in a central place. Our own church here is no exception. Some call it a communion table, others may call it an altar and they have similar backgrounds. In many Christian churches the altar became a table.

Among other things, the presence of the table here reminds us of the Lord's supper. It takes us back to that last supper Jesus had with his disciples. It also takes us farther back to the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem. And more than that it symbolizes the common place, the place where God, the Lord and sustainer of life meets us, and it is where we often in our daily lives meet each other.

In our homes, wherever we live, play or work, there is something mystically beautiful and powerful about the table. It is no accident that when two persons or two groups want to be reconciled to each other, they gather around a table. When a salesman wants to sell a customer, it is not uncommon for him or her to take the prospective

buyer to lunch or dinner. When two persons are courting each other, very often they will go out to dinner together or one will invite the other to his or her home for a meal. If we want to honor someone, we often invite that person to sit at our table with us. If friends or relatives are moving away, frequently the last thing we do is to have them to our home for a meal before they leave.

Or think how many deep family discussions have been held around the kitchen or dining room table. In your own experiences, think of the memories that are associated with the tables in your own life.

Thus when Jesus chose to spend that last evening with his friends at a table, he was doing what people have done through the years and what we still do in such situations. Ours is a "table" religion.

Furthermore, Jesus was continuing a great heritage of his own people. In the 23rd Psalm, one of the most precious lines is, "He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

This phrase traces its history all the way back to the Passover event. As the people of Israel were surrounded by their enemies and were preparing to leave slavery in Egypt, God prepares a table for them. Also as they journey toward the promised land, God continues to provide for them--he prepares a table before them in the presence of their enemies. All of this of course is couched in the symbolism of the sheperd who provides food for his sheep even while the sheep are surrounded by the wolves and others who would seek to kill them.

So Jesus and his disciples prepare a table together on their last night and they too are surrounded by enemies as well as by friends. I'm sure that the early Christians as they faced persecution for their faith, often recalled these things as they prepared their tables while being surrounded by their enemies.

Thus the table in our faith is a symbol of hope. God continues to care for us even when we are surrounded on all sides by whatever kinds of things are threatening us.

So this morning as we gather again symbolically around the Lord's table, remember all the things tables have

meant in your life. Even more so, remember that God is the host at all of our tables and particularly this communion table. It is God who sustains us and the whole creation.

gather around table as a country, etc.